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Lucifer Rising

Page 28

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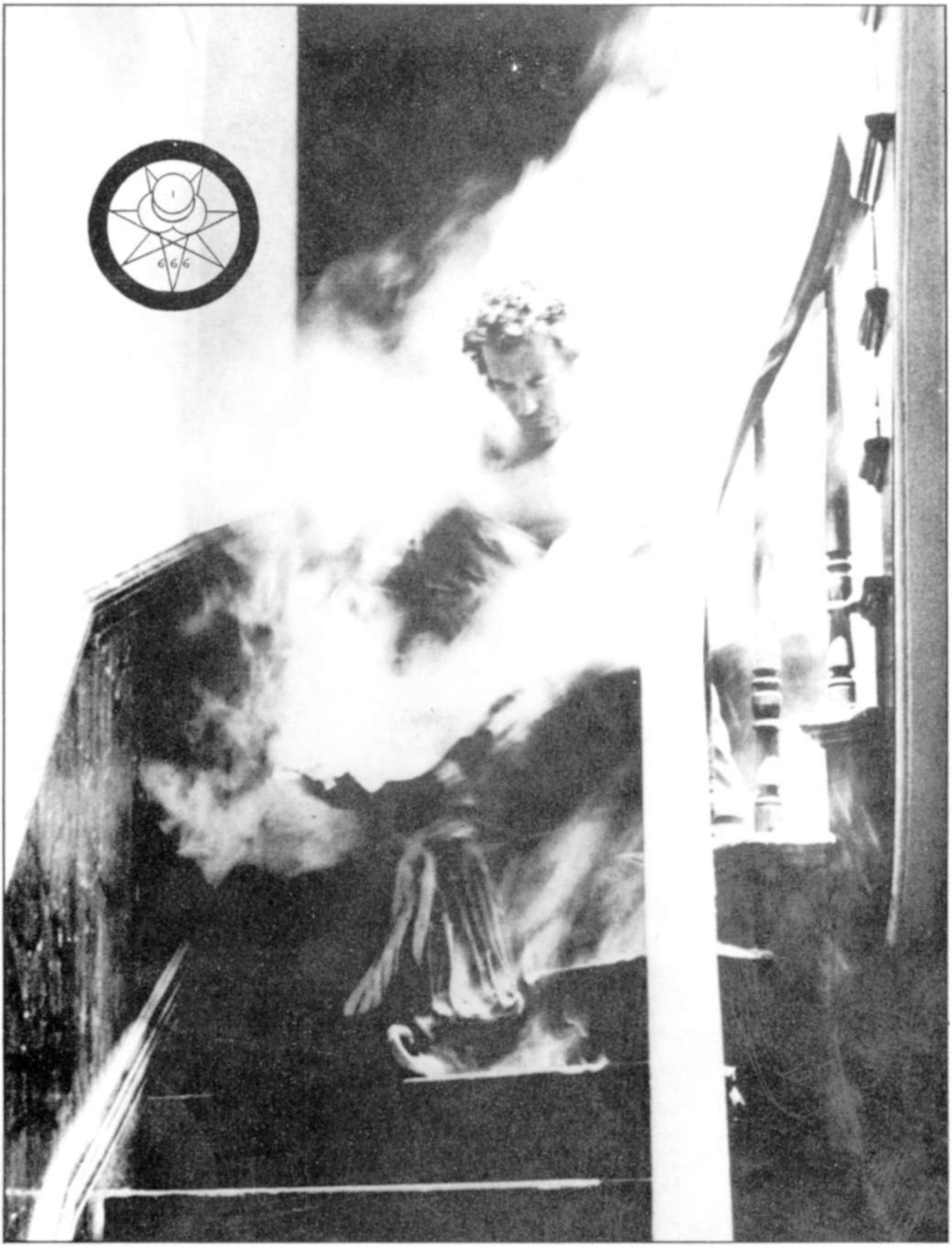

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LUCIFER, LIGHT AND MAGICK

The Films of Kenneth Anger

by Hal Aigner and Michael Goodwin

Kenneth Anger's Magic Lantern Cycle will be screened Wednesday, April 10th at 8 p.m., Wheeler Auditorium, U.C. Berkeley; Friday, April 12th at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday, April 13th at 8 p.m., San Francisco Museum of Art. $1.50 for all showings.

Kenneth Anger.

He danced with Shirley Temple at cotillion. Years later, terrified peasants of Cefalu (an island off Sicily), crucified a cat on his doorstep. His mentor, Aleister Crowley, was labeled by the British press as "the wickedest man in the world." He claims to have once raised a demon in Golden Gate Park and kept the fiend under control for three days. Most of his first version of *Lucifer Rising* was stolen from the Straight Theater by Bobby Beausoleil (currently serving a life sentence in San Quentin for murder) apparently under orders from Charles Manson. He is a devotee of Lucifer, the biblical "Bringer of Light." Playwright Tennessee Williams characterized his 1947 film *Fireworks* as, "the most exciting use of cinema I have ever seen."

Kenneth Anger is no ordinary man.

Quite the opposite, in fact. When listing the world's leading independent filmmakers—"independent" in the sense that they make personal films entirely outside the Hollywood system—the top three are easy: Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, and Kenneth Anger. After that, the rest are a matter of debate.

Anger, a Bay Area resident for many years, left the country in 1967. He has resided in Europe ever since. His first visit in seven years took place in December, when he slipped into town and out again, virtually unnoticed. On April 10th, 12th and 13th, he will make his second local appearance.

The occasion? Three rare screenings of the Anger Magic Lantern Cycle—a chronological retrospective of the filmmaker's greatest work, including eight Anger classics and the first part of the new version of *Lucifer Rising.* Anger will be present to comment on the films—making the event one of extraordinary interest.

The Magick Lantern Cycle is more than just a fancy name for a retrospective—as the title implies, it is conceived as a magickal ritual—an invocation of power. Anyone who has experienced the Cycle can testify to its cumulative effect. Originally programmed by Anger to culminate with *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (The program for a 1966 showing suggests that "Psychedelic researchers desirous to Turn On for *Pleasure Dome* should absorb their sugar cubes at this point."), the Cycle now includes several films completed since 1966, notably the astonishing *Invocation of My Demon Brother.* One assumes that the appropriate point for sugar cube absorption has shifted accordingly—probably to somewhere near the beginning of *Pleasure Dome*—to accommodate the added films.

Although a screening of the Cycle is an event in itself, the added excitement of a new Anger film—*Lucifer Rising*—raises the event to a whole other level. Past experience proves that the release of *any* new Anger is a noteworthy moment in cinema.

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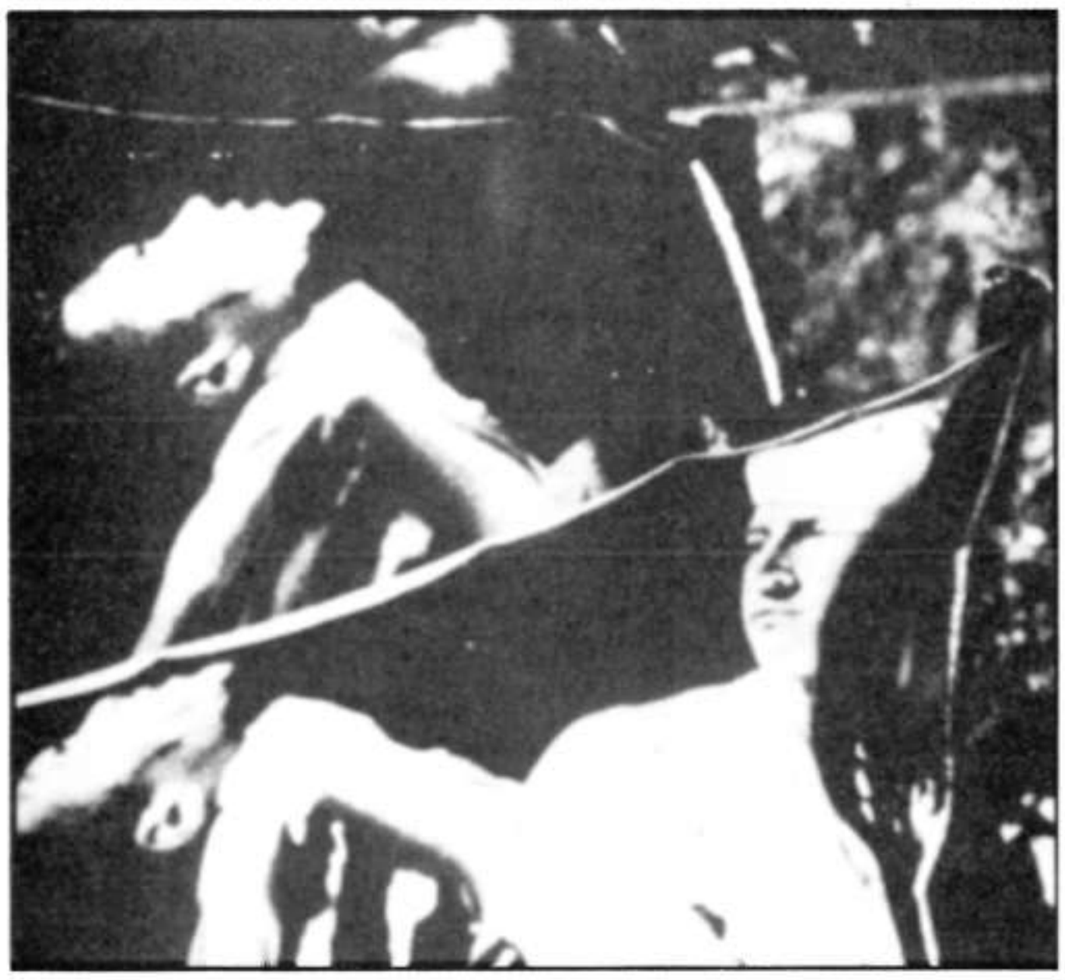
"Zap, you're pregnant - that's witchcraft."



Anger and Dream Lover from FIREWORKS

Three-year old Kenneth Anger, riding a large dog, as the Changeling in Max Reinhardt's A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

Anger is a filmmaker of genius. For many, the pure poetry of his images and editing are sufficient proof of that statement. Others find a "pop" value to his work and, indeed, Anger's creations have nurtured many of the most interesting pop trends of the Sixties. Still others look to Anger's films for a glimpse of the occult. Anger himself insists on a close identification between his movies and magick—"the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with the Will," according to mentor Crowley—to the point where the films are not *about* magick, they *are* magick; ritual objects that invoke the very powers and ideas that inform them. Anger insists that there is no difference between making a movie and casting a spell; that his life work is magick, his magickal weapon cinematography.

Anger is not a prolific filmmaker; given the intensity and depth of his films, this is no surprise. Born in Santa Monica, California, in 1930, he started making movies at the ripe old age of nine, experimenting with hand-tinted leader, science fiction films and psychodrama. *Fireworks,* his first widely screened film, was shot in three frantic nights when his parents were away from home. A "dream film," it depicts a young man being beaten and eviscerated by a group of sailors. Despite (or perhaps because of) its technical crudity, *Fireworks* packs an emotional wallop that takes viewers by surprise. Packed with striking images, it's an extraordinary film by any standards; when one considers that Anger was only 17 when he made it, the movie becomes miraculous.

Fireworks was followed by *Puce Moment* (1949) and *Rabbit's Moon* (1950)—neither of which were completed until the early Seventies. Minor films (only in comparison with his own masterpieces, we hasten to add), they illuminate Anger's developing style and concerns. *Puce Moment* is another dream film, depicting (in inimitable Anger fashion) the fantasy-life of a Twenties female film star. *Rabbit's Moon* is an Italian-style *commedia,* shot-through with intimations of behind-the-scenes ritual (embodied in a repeated three-stage zoom shot of the full moon) and accompanied by a soundtrack made up of prime rock'n' roll songs. We don't know if the soundtrack was made in 1971 or earlier, but if the latter then it forecasts the great rock 'n' roll track that would accompany *Scorpio Rising* in 1964.

With *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953) Anger moved with sure-handed skill into his major body of work. Almost all of the qualities that distinguish Anger's finest films are present in *Eaux.* Shot on special infra-red sensitive film and printed onto color stock through a blue filter, the film follows an ethereal figure ("the Water Witch") through a night-time labyrinth of levels, cascades, balustrades, staircases, grottoes and ever-gushing, leaping fountains until the Witch and the Water become one. Shot in the beautiful Villa d'Este fountains near Tivoli, Italy, the

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Something that is nowhere pictured, yet everywhere present...

film's impact far exceeds its immediate subject—and the only possible explanation is style. Or is it?

Anger's mysterious editing rhythms and disturbing juxtapositions of image are capable of generating meanings that cannot be captured in words—they can only be experienced through the rituals of the films themselves. His sensitive eye divines just how long to hold a foaming waterspout, precisely when to bring the Witch into the foreground, exactly where to intercut a leering stone face. Working through the medium of image and sound, Anger creates Something that is nowhere pictured, yet everywhere present. This Presence marks all of Anger's works-to-follow; it is the quality that gives them their mystery and power. It's magick, pure and simple. And the goal of that magick, in his own words, is to "impose upon the watcher an alternative reality."

Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (1954), Anger's next film, was a pantheistic/psychedelic ritual that announced his preoccupation with magick and the Powers of Light and Darkness. Performed by a Los Angeles group of Thelemites—devotees of the late Aleister Crowley—it is rather baffling (as are most of Anger's later films) without some knowledge of Crowley, the British black magician.

A "hagiography" is a biography of a saint. Anyone who could write an auto-hagiography would have either to be seized by extraordinary conceit—or know something the rest of us don't. Aleister Crowley, the British magus born 1875, died 1947, was just such a person. Crowley's parents were members of the obscure Christian sect known as the Plymouth Brethren—zealous types who believed that they were the only true Christians, that the Bible was literally true, that the Second Coming was imminent. From his birth, Crowley's mother regarded her son as the Beast 666—the legendary creature of the Apocalypse prophesied in Revelations. A hell of a thing to do to a kid.

Crowley's life was dedicated to the pursuit of ever greater mystical power and understanding. Along the way he developed something of a bad reputation—particularly after it was alleged that he had written wartime propaganda for the Nazis. When he died he left behind his massive auto-hagiography; the *Book of the Law,* a spiritual text allegedly dictated by cosmic forces; the Thelemite cult; and the "k" that changed the spelling of magic to magick. He is immortalized on the *Sgt. Pepper* cover collage, top row, second from the left.

Once Anger was exposed to the teachings of Crowley, he became fascinated—going so far as to say in one interview, "I'm engaged in a long-term selling campaign. I have one product I'm selling: the 20th Century's most misunderstood genius, called Aleister Crowley,"—and Anger's fascination with mystic forces, rituals, Lucifer and the powers that animate daily existence has never waned. His comment on the motorcycle gang in *Scorpio Rising*

3/24 of a second from SCORPIO RISING

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Pleasure Dome... a pantheistic/psychedelic ritual that announced his preoccupation with magick and the Powers of Light and Darkness.

(his 1964 classic) is illuminating: "In all such groups there's something operating. I call it tribal sorcery, tribal magick on a very simple level. Its appeal is basically irrational, it is magick manifestation on a very low level." In retrospect, it's clear that the bikers in *Scorpio* herald the coming of Lucifer himself—a mystical Presence who would emerge as the central figure in the films to follow.

Although Lucifer is obviously a highly meaningful power for Anger, it's hard to pin down his precise significance. By most occult accounts, Lucifer was an archangel who championed a corporal enjoyment of the here-and-now, as opposed to the quest and wait for the White Light of Beatific Vision in a heavenly there-and-then. This opposition to the traditions of Judeo-Christianity lost Lucifer his rank in the Pantheon, and may symbolize the "alternative reality" that Anger's films attempt to impose on his audience. Comments in various interviews over the years find Anger maintaining that Lucifer is not an embodiment of evil—only a victim of Christian propaganda. Furthermore, there are frequent suggestions of Anger's belief that so-called "destructive" forces may only be sweeping away the dying remnants of one era so that another may emerge—an era of the sensual domination of Lucifer.

There's no question that Anger's recent, post-Crowley work is powerful far beyond any rational explanation. Whether you Believe or you don't, the films are there—maddeningly, illogically effective. Why, in *Lucifer Rising*, should a shot of three baboons circling a tree, or a leopard swimming through deep blue water, have the power to send thrills of terror through us? Why should a repeated shot of Anger pacing within a pentagram of lighted candles carry such a weight of meaning? (Why, for that matter, should ten consecutive viewings of *Invocation* have enabled a friend of ours to cure her poison oak?)

Putting aside, for the moment, the possibility that Anger's magick is just that (and we're not necessarily suggesting it isn't), we'd like to note certain basic similarities between the processes of ritual magick and the intense discipline of a dedicated filmmaker. The purpose of a ritual is to concentrate the energies of the magician (or, say, priest) through repetitive actions, chants or mantras, and meditation. Whether it's reciting a rosary, chanting Om Mani Padme Hum, meditating on an image of the Buddha or circling a pentagram, the result is the same: a concentration of energy and a means of directing that energy toward a desired goal. Such a process can result in a curse that works. Or a movie.

Anais Nin with art nouveau chalice, Mysterious Kid with candles: INAUGURATION OF THE PLEASURE DOME. Above left: frame detail.

Rhythm and repetition are basic to virtually all spiritual disciplines—and may operate quite simply through interaction with internal body rhythms and brain-wave patterns. Or they may not. In any case, the rhythmic patterns in Anger's editing are highly unusual—and deeply disturbing. Furthermore, his images are drawn from a rich store of ancient motifs that have the power to work, albeit subconsciously, even on those who have no idea of why they are being affected. As Anger puts it in one of his films, "Zap, you're pregnant. That's witchcraft."

In any case, the concrete fact of the films themselves, and their undeniable power, supercedes any explanation. The most recent works by Anger, *Invocation of My Demon Brother* and the first part of *Lucifer,* share a mysterious quality that defies description. Circular, ritualistic and slightly terrifying, these late works by a master filmmaker transcend the category of "art" to become *experiences.* They are what they are; deal with them at your own risk.

Lucifer in particular (even in its present form as the first half-hour of a work-in-progress) makes us aware of just how successfully Anger has captured the basic forces of the universe in his images. *Lucifer* seems to show the simultaneous creation/destruction of the world—and it leaves us with a nagging suspicion that we have witnessed not a recreation, but the real thing.

The Magick Lantern Cycle—including *Fireworks, Puce Moment, Rabbit's Moon, Eaux d'Artifice, Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome, Scorpio Rising, Kustom Kar Kommandos, Invocation of My Demon Brother,* and *Lucifer Rising, Part One,* will be shown April 10th in Wheeler Auditorium, U.C. Berkeley, and April 12th and 13th at the San Francisco Museum of Art.

In a career that has already spanned 28 years with no sign of approaching an end, Kenneth Anger has created a body of work that has the power to move us, and to make us wonder. Aleister Crowley or no Aleister Crowley, that's magick enough for us. •

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